"Let Earth Rest": A Consumption Sabbath Tent Revival Meeting to Inspire Simplicity and Environmental Action

Joanne M. Moyer

On Sunday, April 22, 2012, a group gathered in Winnipeg to celebrate Earth Day and engage issues of over-consumption and climate change from a Christian perspective. They formed a procession behind a gold-painted oil barrel. Many held signs proclaiming "Love Creation as yourself," "Earth belongs to God," "Reduce, Reuse, Repent," and "Let Earth Rest." As they walked, they sang "Heal the Earth, while we run this race" and "The Earth is crying out in pain, let my people go." The procession gathered under a tent near the provincial legislature to hold a worship service in the style of a tent revival meeting. The main message was delivered by evangelist "Brother Aiden John" (Aiden Enns, editor of *Geez* magazine). He spoke of the loss of connectedness in the post-industrial, capitalist, consumer age, and called his listeners to embrace Sabbath rest. In response to the message, participants were invited to sign a Sabbath pledge and tape it to the oil barrel.

Faith and Sustainability

This Consumption Sabbath Tent Revival Meeting (CSTRM) exemplifies an alternative approach to environmental education and calls to action that moves beyond highly rational, fact-based discourse, and works to present a holistic message combining empirical knowledge with emotion, intuition, creativity, and spirituality.[1] Both the faith basis and the artistic worship aspects of the event facilitated this holistic approach.

Literature from the environmental and sustainable development fields suggests some potential strengths within faith-based approaches for addressing sustainability dilemmas. These include organization and

[1] David W. Orr, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2004), 31; Stephen Sterling, "Learning for Resilience, or the Resilient Learner? Towards a Necessary Paradigm of Sustainable Education," *Environmental Education Research* 16 (2010): 511-28.

Sound in the Land – Music and the Environment, ed. Carol Ann Weaver, Doreen Helen Klassen, and Judith Klassen, special issue, *The Conrad Grebel Review* 33, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 270-281.

infrastructure, rootedness in communities, the ability to provide moral leadership, and a rich pool of educational resources, shared language, and rituals, such as music and singing together.[2] Through these resources, faith-based approaches can inspire individual and social behavior change by linking beliefs and values to practical action, providing positive alternatives to dominant worldviews, and inserting an element of hopefulness derived from a faith commitment and a commitment to action as a practice of faithfulness.[3] Given the urgency of the environmental crisis and the shortcomings of scientific and political responses,[4] there is merit in considering the potential of faith-based approaches, particularly those employing worship, music, and other activities that tap into human dimensions beyond the cognitive.

While empirical studies are increasing, experiential evidence that these approaches can make a contribution is still lacking. Accordingly, in this paper I endeavor to explore how the CSTRM exemplifies the suggested strengths of such approaches, considering themes arising from the Winnipeg event as well as the impact of holistic learning experiences like those enabled through music, dramatic arts, and worship.

Methods, Themes, Patterns

Data were collected through direct observation from my participation in the event, as well as from media reports and blogs, pledge cards, and e-mail questionnaires. The latter were sent to the planning committee and participants whose contact information was included on the pledge cards. Six planners and twenty-one participants responded. Data were analyzed

[2] Julia Berger, "Religious Nongovernmental Organizations: An Exploratory Analysis," *Voluntas* 14 (2003): 15-39; Gary Gardner, *Invoking the Spirit: Religion and Spirituality in the Quest for a Sustainable World* (Washington, DC: Worldwatch Institute, 2002), 11; Roger S. Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 11.

[3] Roger S. Gottlieb, "You Gonna Be Here Long? Religion and Sustainability," *Worldviews* 12 (2008): 163-78; Gregory E. Hitzhusen, "Going Green and Renewing Life: Environmental Education in Faith Communities," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 133 (2012): 35-44; Laurel Kearns, "Noah's Ark Goes to Washington: A Profile of Evangelical Environmentalism," *Social Compass* 44 (1997): 349-66.

[4] Mark Hathaway and Leonardo Boff, *The Tao of Liberation: Exploring the Ecology of Transformation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009).

using NVivo software to organize the material, and to identify themes and patterns that constitute the ensuing discussion.

Community

The CSTRM planning process was rooted within the Mennonite community in Winnipeg, evolving from an adult education class at Charleswood Mennonite Church (CMC). The inter-church, ecumenical planning committee, sponsored by CMC and *Geez* magazine, relied heavily on congregational communication networks to advertise the event, which was promoted in the announcements of at least six churches. This is how the majority of participants heard about it.

In addition to using resources within their communities, several of the planners also described a desire to create community, as in this example:

> I was hoping to animate and inspire a segment of the population that might feel burdened by the state of the environment. I was hoping to foster a sense of community among spiritually-inclined eco-activists, and equip them with small and large steps they could take in creating a more environmentally sustainable urban lifestyle.[5]

Community was a dominant theme for CSTRM participants who enjoyed meeting friends and derived significant encouragement from participating in an event with like-minded people:

> I think the best part for me was just being reassured that there are others [for whom] creation care is a big concern, and that we can support each other.[6]

> The event gave me courage that my small efforts, when joined to others', were worth it.[7]

Thus, the community provided support, encouragement, and inspiration, becoming an arena for accountability and admonition. For Participant 77, the event served as "good peer pressure, in the best sense, like, all my friends were doing it." It was also:

[5] Planner 002
[6] Participant 87
[7] Participant 121

> [A] time of admonition—especially our addiction to oil. . . . This event was an encouragement to try harder and to remember that our existence is tied to the care of our environment. I can't point to any particular thing that I changed because of this event, but like going to church or participating in a devotional each day it is/was a reminder to act on our best intentions.[8]

Congregational singing was part of community-building in CSTRM, further reinforcing a sense of connectedness among participants, as singing together is an important communal activity for many Mennonites.[9] Building on these elements, CSTRM demonstrates the role Christian community can play in facilitating resistance to consumer culture, as expressed by Jesuit scholar John F. Kavanaugh: "a Christian, in the face of our culture's dwarfing and isolating of the individual, must turn to a community of shared life-experience which both fosters committed faith and enables the individual to criticize and challenge the programming of culture."[10]

Theological and Prophetic Traditions

Communities of faith are rooted in rich cultural and theological traditions offering moral principles and values, standards for behavior and action, and cultural critiques that can inspire, guide, and support individual and social action.[11] Within a larger framework of seeking justice for people and the land, CSTRM planners built on two counter-cultural theological streams: simplicity and Sabbath-keeping.

Historically, the Mennonite commitment to simplicity derives from a belief that Christians' primary allegiance is to the Kingdom of God, not the pursuit of wealth and power.[12] The planners' intention was to address what journalist Aaron Epp describes as "the over-consumptive lifestyle of the average North American,"[13] in particular, the consumption of oil:

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[8] Participant 129

[9] Maureen Epp and Carol Ann Weaver, eds., *Sound in the Land: Essays on Mennonites and Music* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2005).

[10] John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 132.

[11] Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith*, 12.

[12] Travis Kroeker, "Rich Mennonites in an Age of Mammon: Is a Messianic Political Economy Possible?" *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 27 (2009): 167-78.

[13] Aaron Epp, "Nothing Old Fashioned about Earth Day 'Revival Meeting," *Christian Week,*

> I was hoping we could come up with some powerful and effective symbols for our commitment to reduce our consumption; also, to get a message out to the larger Christian community about anti-consumerism being something Christians should do.[14]

This message was both heard and remembered by participants. Participant 93 described the event as a "sincere lament of our participation in over-consumption," while Participant 119 commented that

> [T]here was this sense that living a slower pace lifestyle—being more intentional about how we use the earth's resources—is not only about saying no to conveniences, it's also about saying yes to a vibrant simplified life where less really is more.

Through the second theme, Sabbath-keeping, CSTRM planners provided a positive alternative to the culture of consumption. In planning the event, they made direct links between consumption and the need to appreciate God's gifts and to relinquish society's addictive dependence on excess:

> We chose the consumption Sabbath theme to encapsulate the imbalanced relationship between humanity and the earth.[15]

> The way that we continue in consumer culture is to get as much as we possibly can out of nature and the land for ourselves. . . . But God requires us to do what's necessary for the land and creation to also have rest and recuperate from the damage that we've done.[16]

The planners relied on several contemporary thinkers to shape their ideas. Borrowing from Ched Myers,[17] Enns preached about the "three Rs" of Sabbath living: 1) recognize the abundant gifts of creation; 2) restrain ourselves as an expression of gratitude; and 3) redistribute the gift to those

April 23, 2012, www.christianweek.org/stories.php?id=1968, accessed September 17, 2013.

[14] Planner 005

[15] Will Braun, "Earth Day Revival Amuses and Transforms: Reduce, Reuse, Repent," *Huffington Post,* April 26, 2012, www.huffingtonpost.com/will-braun/earth-day-revival_b_1454477.html, accessed August 12, 2013.

[16] Quoted in Epp, "Nothing Old Fashioned about Earth Day 'Revival Meeting.'"

[17] Ched Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (Washington, DC: Tell the Word, 2001).

in need. Inspiration was also drawn from Ric Hudgens,[18] who highlights biblical warnings that God will enforce Sabbath rest if necessary (e.g., Leviticus 26:34-39). Hudgens sees contemporary parallels in this warning, particularly in the context of globalization and climate change, but like CSTRM planners, he draws hope from Sabbath principles as a "spiritual weapon" for the impending struggle. A CSTRM blogger summarized the hopeful message that Sabbath principles provide:

> A consumption Sabbath is an opportunity to worship God by releasing ourselves from the grip of over-consumption and entering a cycle of growth in which we seek healthy relationships with what gives us life. By this we may enter into the freedom and salvation of God's grace and blessing.[19]

Through traditional Christian theological themes, event planners found spoken and sung language and symbols that resonated with their audience, providing key resources that bequeath faith communities with the ability to provide moral leadership, educate and transform their adherents, and inspire action.[20] Worship traditions contain various rituals that can fulfill these functions.

Worship

In adopting the style of a tent revival meeting, CSTRM planners chose a particular form of worship with attendant language, music, and rituals that were generally familiar to their participants. Components of a "traditional" revival meeting included a tent, a gospel choir leading congregational singing, testimonials, a revivalist preacher, and an altar call (i.e., Sabbath pledges). The form was presented in a lighthearted, tongue-in-cheek manner that was part worship, part performance. In taking this approach, planners sought to add levity to a serious topic, using experiential and holistic methods to fully engage those involved:

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[18] Ric Hudgens, "The Land Will Have Its Rest," *Jesus Radicals,* January 30, 2012, www.jesusradicals.com/the-land-will-have-its-rest, accessed January 14, 2014.

[19] Tara Forshaw, "Consumption Sabbath," *The Salvation Army Ethics Centre* [Winnipeg] blog (May 8, 2012), www.salvationarmyethics.org/featured/consumption-sabbath, accessed June 20, 2013.

[20] Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith*, 11-13; Hitzhusen, "Going Green and Renewing Life," 35-44.

> As organizers, our wish was to combine performance art, sincere faith and concern for the earth. . . . Our aim was not to parody the revival genre so much as to re-purpose it. So instead of toning down the religious stridency, as is the impulse of our age, Brother Aiden John revved it right up, but with a postmodern spin and plenty of self-referential humor.[21]

> I hoped that the event would infuse fresh energy into people's engagement on enviro issues and allow for ritualistic processing of feelings of guilt, hopelessness and being overwhelmed. . . . For me it was also an experiment in combining faith and environmental issues in a way that was meaningful but not overbearingly earnest.[22]

The success of this experiment was mixed, though positive responses were more numerous than criticisms. Positive comments were effusive:

> It was exciting and abounding in creativity. I loved the subversive use of the gospel tent meeting style.[23]

> I was moved by the experience and feel that those organizing and leading the service put a lot of thought into the use of the tent revival format. The tent revival format allowed for some playfulness in the worship and was carried out with lots of enthusiasm and energy, while still allowing for the truth of our involvement in the destruction of creation and our lament of this to rise out of our worship.[24]

Others found the satirical tone of the service and the style of the speaker difficult to engage with as a spiritual experience:

> The service was fun, but felt a little contrived; the jumble of 'worship' and lampooning didn't quite work for me as a spiritual experience.[25]

[21] Braun, "Earth Day Revival Amuses and Transforms."
[22] Planner 001
[23] Participant 77
[24] Participant 88
[25] Participant 101

> The worship service was confusing . . . was it meant to be worship? Or was it poking fun at a form of worship that some have found meaningful?[26]

These responses to CSTRM demonstrate that employment of religious ritual can be powerful but also risky, because people respond differently to symbols and rituals. The untraditional aspects of the event received the most ambivalent or negative responses, but despite some disconnection from the worship style, most respondents still derived enjoyment and inspiration from the event.

Hope and Joy

Given the gravity of the environmental crisis, many environmental initiatives are pervaded by a spirit of fear, guilt, and despair. However, messages of doom and gloom are poor motivators for transformation and action, particularly when confronting social, economic, and political forces that appear insurmountable.[27] Providing a sense of hope and joy within this context is one of the greatest gifts faith-based initiatives can offer the environmental movement.[28] In describing their impressions of CSTRM, participants wrote broadly about their pleasure derived from the celebratory and playful atmosphere, the passion and energy displayed, the music, and the fun of worshiping outside:

> Overall, the event seemed to have a celebratory feel to it—as if we were saying that living in harmony with nature can be a joyous act.[29]

> I was glad to see that some Christians were highlighting this very complex topic in a way that was festive.[30]

Some participants noted that the event elicited feelings of guilt,

[26] Participant 102
[27] Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith*, 198.
[28] See, for example, Robert Booth Fowler, *The Greening of Protestant Thought* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1995), 20; Gottlieb, "You Gonna Be Here Long?," 163-78.
[29] Participant 119
[30] Participant 127

particularly with respect to failed pledges, but others experienced a lifting of guilt and obligation, and a transition to inspiration and joyful challenge:

> I personally felt guilty for a long time about not knowing how to do better. . . .The Consumption Sabbath further relieved those residual guilt feelings, because the sense was so much one of thanking God for the gift of creation and experiencing that. That's a far better place out of which to come to our good behaviors.[31]

> Hopeful. To be given encouragement to continue, and to aim to care for creation with more joy and love and perhaps less obligation.[32]

Thus, CSTRM engaged difficult and complex issues in a playful, carnival-like atmosphere that largely inspired its participants. In the face of climate change, however, simply feeling inspired is not sufficient.

Inspiring Action

Participant pledges reveal how well the CSTRM's message may translate into action. Of 300 participants, 129 signed pledge cards. Many people pledged to do more than one thing, resulting in a total 206 separate pledge activities (Table 1). The number of pledges made, and the commitment evident in their wording, indicate that feelings of inspiration translated at the very least into an intention to act.

[31] Participant 128
[32] Participant 93

Table 1
Participant Pledges (Major Categories)

Pledge Category	Percent by Participant	Examples
Food	44	Gardening, local food, vegetarian, organic, fair trade, canning skills, less processed and packaged food
Transportation	36	Cycling, public transit, walking, reduce motorized transport, flying
Money and materials	22	Reduce paper, reusable beverage containers, clothing choices, consider money use and purchases, give more
Digital/screens	20	Less internet, computer, television, phone, read more

In the questionnaires, over half of the respondents described acting on their pledges in some way:

> This summer I have been working 12 km [7.5 miles] away from where I live and I have worked my way up to cycling every day of the week, most weeks, which is a lot more cycling than I have ever done before.[33]

> Post CS event I have tried to be even more careful about not driving unnecessarily. I have used my bike even more often. I have tried not to consume as much and have looked for more creative ways to reduce garbage and waste and recycle more.[34]

One woman, who pledged to use more local products and produce, formed a food-canning group at her church that has picked or purchased locally grown fruit and vegetables, and canned jam, tomatoes, and salsa. Conversely, a minority of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their pledge action:

> I have to admit that I am still on the computer way too much. I did try for a while to cut down on my time, but I am weak.[35]

[33] Participant 88
[34] Participant 113
[35] Participant 105

And a few expressed continuing intentions for future action, as in this case:

> We still dream of a day when we will not drive our car.[36]

Based on participant responses, the act of writing and attempting to fulfill a pledge appears to have been a meaningful exercise that gave practical expression to the message conveyed in the CSTRM and resulted in some concrete action at both the personal and community level.

Conclusion

Participant responses to CSTRM suggest that certain aspects of the faith-based approach strengthened the event's impact. While questionnaire respondents did not engage musical components at length, it is important to emphasize the role of music and other performance arts in environmental education and activism. Philosopher James Smith argues that our behavior is driven by our fundamental desires, formed by significant, meaningful practices that shape our identity, like worship.[37] In Christian settings, music constitutes a key component of worship and can shape human desires in particular ways.

First, music is a holistic learning experience. While much academic learning focuses on cognitive processes, music involves the whole body, including cognition, imagination, and emotion.[38] The impact of whole body experiences was apparent in the strong responses evoked among participants by the CSTRM parade and worshiping outside. Second, music carries the stories and narratives that shape our love and desire,[39] as exemplified by the repurposed gospel songs sung during the march. Words like "Gonna lay down my fossil fuel, ain't gonna study oil no more" eloquently summarize the theological and prophetic themes explored in the event. At the same time, performative activities have the capacity to activate emotions and personal taste, which may enhance or impede the reception of a particular message, as demonstrated by varied reactions to the tent meeting style. When successful, the performative nature of music and worship may facilitate the translation

[36] Participant 119

[37] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 25.

[38] Ibid, 170.

[39] Ibid, 172.

of thoughts and ideas into actions because they are communicated by a mode that is itself active.

Finally, in worship, music is made by a group. As a communal exercise that can shape desires, music also subtly connects people to networks of support, solidarity, and accountability. In their responses, CSTRM participants emphasized the importance of community in reminding them of their responsibility to live well on the earth, in admonishing them to strive harder, and in encouraging them by demonstrating that they are not alone on this journey.

Joanne M. Moyer is Assistant Professor in Geography and Environmental Studies, The King's University, Edmonton, Alberta.